



Walton County Democratic Party
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Ray Padgett, Chairman

Locally, how do you see St. Joe shaping the economy and landscape of Walton County and Northwest Florida? Do you feel too many, not enough or just enough has been granted to St. Joe by state and local officials in terms of land use?

The St. Joe Company is Florida's largest private landowner with about 850,000 acres, located primarily in northwest Florida. Approximately 387,000 acres is located within ten miles of the coast and contains some of our country's finest beachfront property; as well as, some of our most ecologically sensitive wetlands and watershed. Historically, St. Joe has been a political and financial giant in our area; with their expanded development efforts through Arvida, St. Joe Commercial, and Advantis, their status and influence are growing exponentially. For all visible intents and purposes, the St. Joe Company is a highly influential but good neighbor to citizens of Walton County and the panhandle.

St. Joe is capable of massive development projects because of its land, financial resources and its political influence. Some of these projects like the Bay County Airport site change, the Westbay development plans and the 31,369 acre Ecosystem Management Agreement (EMA) with the Department of Environmental Protection are attracting intense scrutiny and legal review by citizen groups. The EMA includes land in both Bay and Walton Counties and should be of particular interest to Walton County citizens. The Panhandle Citizens Coalition, Inc., Citizens for the Bay, Inc., and Sierra Club, Inc. have filed a legal Petition for Administrative Hearing in order to bring about a formal open public and court review of the details of this agreement.

Most of the concerns raised by this petition are adherence to current environmental laws regarding issues such as wetland mitigation, dredge and fill, potable water availability and treatment, and storm water discharge. Concerns of special treatment for St. Joe in the development permitting process are also raised. Specifically, the EMA is perpetual; all projects, no matter when developed, must only comply with the EMA; and individual permits for each project may not be required.

Small developers and individual lot owners must follow the latest DEP and Corp of Engineers rules and regulations and must obtain permits and pay applicable permit fees for each parcel being developed. Extensive delays and costs associated with each permit application can be devastating for the owner of a small lot on one of our local bayous.

Delays in government review can be six months to one year and costs for surveys, environmental studies and application fees can be \$3,000 or more. In one specific case of which we are aware, the application review/approval process is already over eight months with expected costs of about \$5,000 being spent on surveys, studies and application fees. The EMA for St. Joe appears to streamline or eliminate this permit application process.

The Walton County Democratic Party commends St. Joe on their many contributions to our county and their vision for future communities. However, we believe our government should provide timely, efficient and comprehensive service to all developers and individuals building homes and offices in our county. The same streamlined service provided for St. Joe should be provided for all development projects. Government cutbacks and personnel reductions must not be used to favor one group over others. Fair and equal treatment for everyone is mandatory for free enterprise to survive.

It was implied in the June 6, 2003 issue of the PBS program, The Last Frontier, that St. Joe and many of our public officials have intricate financial ties. In the past six years St. Joe has made campaign contributions to more than 100 candidates in both parties. Additional contributions were made to State Senate President Jim King and Governor Jeb Bush. St. Joe recently purchased a 1/3 interest in the Governor's former real estate company. Does this help St. Joe? According to The Last Frontier, the state recently purchased over 120,000 acres of mostly swamp and wetland property from St. Joe for conservation and allowed over four miles of U.S. 98 to be moved. Governor Bush is the biggest cheerleader for St. Joe's new airport proposal planned to be built north of Panama City at a cost of about \$300 million of taxpayer money. The current Panama City airport only operates at about 50% capacity – why build a new one? St. Joe is petitioning the state to build new roads across its property and Governor Bush has already earmarked \$2 million for planning of a new \$700 million four-lane road connecting the Panhandle coast to Alabama. Only the participants involved know the legitimacy of these efforts and only the citizens can determine their ultimate benefit.